

Personnel Sourcing for Transition Teams
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Healing a nation ravaged by counterinsurgency is an extremely complex process. It requires governance, providing essential services, economic development, training and employing host nation forces, combat operations and information operations. The United States' strategy to improve a damaged nation is two pronged: first by creating a positive security environment and then by enabling the return of a legitimate government that can provide law and order and essential services. U.S. military forces create a positive security environment by presence on the ground and by training, mentoring and advising host nation security forces (both civil and military) using transition teams. However, The USMC's current policy of manning transition teams is not conducive to winning the conflict in OEF/OIF because it strips deploying units of Marines in critical billets, places inexperienced or unprepared Marines in positions of influence and fails to meet current Military Defense Strategy.

Transition Team Basics

Transition teams come in many different shapes and sizes. Some of the better known examples are: military transition teams (MTTs), embedded transition teams (ETTs), border transition teams (BTTs) and police transition teams (PTTs). MTTs train

Iraqi Army units, ETTs train Afghani Security Forces or Afghani Army Units, BTTs train security personnel positioned along Iraq's international borders, and PTTs train Iraqi police units. While their target audience differs, the transition team mission across the board remains to teach, coach, and mentor the host nation forces with the end state being a self supporting, standalone security force. To accomplish this mission, the transition team's table of organization (T/O or personnel) remains mainly the same independent of the specific type of transition team assigned. Currently in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom there is no standing Marine unit that supplies personnel to all transition teams so personnel must be sourced from existing Marine units with missions other than supporting transition teams¹.

Degradation of Mission Accomplishment²

Each MTT has a major assigned as the team leader who normally comes from a combat arms military occupational specialty (MOS). This major has traditionally been the operations officer or executive officer from a battalion sized element in the Division (1st, 2nd or 3rd). Many times this

¹ The following discussion, in an effort to narrow the scope of the argument, will focus largely on MTTs serving with Iraqi Army units.

² Unless otherwise noted, material in this section is based on the author's personal experience as a MTT Member for 1st Bn, 3rd BDE, 1st Iraqi Army Division during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM from June 2006 to January 2007

battalion is already in its deployment cycle, so this Marine, in a critical billet, is stripped from his unit just prior to a unit deployment. In the case of 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marines (3/2) during its 2006-2007 deployment to Habbaniyah, Iraq, the Battalion Executive Officer LtCol Scott Leonard felt "The loss of the Bn Operations Officer had a significant impact on the battalion. It required the CO/XO to become more involved in operations providing oversight that would generally not have been required had the [Operations Officer] stayed in his billet.³" Exacerbating the loss of the third ranking officer in the battalion is the fact that duty on a TT is a temporary duty, so a replacement cannot be assigned to backfill the deploying unit. The battalion or unit must move Marines from other billets in order to fill the gaps left by the Marines assigned to the TTs. In addition to losing the battalion operations officer, 14 additional Marines from 3/2 "were sent to the MTT prior to deployment... and the [internal] replacements were not at the same qualifications as the Marines assigned to the MTT."⁴ The loss of key personnel noticeably degrades mission accomplishment by forcing junior Marines with less experience and training to accomplish tasks in the battalion.

³ Lieutenant Colonel Scott Leonard. Executive Officer, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment. E-mail interview by author. 1 December 2007.

⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Scott Leonard.

In July 2007, TTs required a minimum of 15 personnel, ten SNCO or officer billets, one Navy Corpsman and four driver/gunner NCO or non-NCO Marines. Each of these Marines and Sailors perform vital tasks at their parent command. When 3rd Bn, 2nd Marines deployed to Habbaniyah, Iraq from July 2006–February 2007, they supported three different MTTs in addition to various other TTs with more than 40 personnel, half of which were SNCOs and officers. In the words of former MTT leader LtCol William McCullough "We have been treating assignment of advisors like fleet assistance program (FAP) quotas."⁵ Sending Marines from a deployed unit without any transition team training not only degrades the parent battalion but hurts the transition team that must train the new Marines in a combat environment.

As of early 2008, it is generally accepted that the Al-Anbar province of Iraq (controlled by Marines) has experienced a significant reduction in violence in conjunction with an increase in the open support of the populace. These events may bring to question whether stripping units of Marines in critical billets is truly a concern. Battalions send key personnel to transition teams and those transition teams train personnel ad hoc in country, and the success is occurring despite the mission

⁵ Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned. *Advising Foreign Forces: A Compilation of Reports*. 31 January 2007, 40.

degradation. According to MSgt Jack Sheaffer, a former team chief, "Some MTT Marines are joined to a team with very little time left before deployment... [MTT] success depends very much on their ability to work together."⁶

Inexperienced and Unprepared Advisors

The Marines who are assigned to advisor duty often come unprepared, unwillingly, and with insufficient time to train properly before deployment. These Marines are not conducive to winning the conflict in OIF and OEF. Marines serving with 1st Battalion, 3rd Brigade, 1st Iraqi Army Division (1-3-1 MTT) from July 2006 to January 2007 serve to illustrate this point. 1-3-1 MTT deployed as a ten-man team and upon arriving at the Iraqi Army base in Iraq received seven additional team members without language training or any training on advising foreign forces. Not only were these Marines taken from units already deployed in Iraq, but there was insufficient time for the team members to be screened or evaluated to ensure they had the ability to be effective advisors. According to TT leader Colonel John E. Stone, evaluations are very important, "Not everyone can be an

⁶ Master Sergeant Jack Sheaffer, Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned observation.
URL:<<https://www.mccll.usmc.mil/middle/lms.cfm?doit=view&lmsid=42826&pf=1>>
Accessed 12 February 2008

[effective] advisor - some don't have the temperament or personality for it."⁷

One of the harsh realities of combat operations is the need for combat replacements. In historical high intensity combat operations, combat replacements were identified prior to and during a conflict and stationed so they could quickly replace Marines who became combat ineffective. Since there is no pool of TT personnel in CONUS, many TTs experienced significant delays in receiving combat replacements. According to Lieutenant Colonel James Zientek, Team Leader for 3rd Brigade, 1st Iraqi Army Division (3-1 MTT) from December 2005 to December 2006, "Obtaining combat replacements ran the gamut from a replacement arriving the next day to a lengthy process that required continual attention from the MTT staff to request and re-request (replacements)."⁸ These combat replacements received little to no training prior to reporting to their MTT, and many times were notified and deployed or transferred within 48 hours.

Advising foreign forces is more art than science and requires all advisors to be on the same sheet of music at all times to ensure the entire team is reinforcing common themes to

⁷ Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned. *Advising Foreign Forces: A Compilation of Reports*. 31 January 2007, 40. Cited hereafter as *Advising Foreign Forces*.

⁸ Lieutenant Colonel James Zientek, *Military Transition Team 3-1 After Action Report, Operation Iraqi Freedom 05-07*. 29 December 2006.

the Iraqi Battalion. The most common explanation for sending unprepared and untrained Marines to transition teams is "needs of the Marines Corps." However, without sufficient time for the team to train together and learn the strengths and weaknesses of each member, the MTT will operate at a reduced level of effectiveness. Additionally, LtCol Kurtis Lang from the 2nd Marine Division G-1 office makes the requirement clear, "As TTs are CMC's #1 priority, 2d MarDiv's TTs are staffed before OIF Bns."⁹ Although this refutes the needs of the Marine Corps argument, most former advisors still feel that "Advisors were selected from within the operating forces (1st and 2d Divisions) based on availability, not on qualifications."¹⁰ In one instance, a team deployed with a limited duty officer (LDO) captain from a combat service support military occupational specialty (MOS) serving as the second in command of a MTT. The Marine was pulled from the supporting establishment after the operating forces were unable to fill the billet. The result was reduced effectiveness for a team deployed in daily combat situations. Many former team leaders had a similar experience and feel that, "advisors need to be combat veterans. They need to be mature, experienced people. They need to be experts in

⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Kurtis Lang, Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff G-1, 2nd Marine Division. E-mail interview by author. January 18 2008.

¹⁰ Advising Foreign Forces, 40.

their fields (MOS) and should have performed duties at the level that they are advising and mentoring."¹¹

Transition Teams as the Main Effort

The National Security Strategy of the United States of America issued in March 2006 states:

"In the cause of ending tyranny and promoting effective democracy, we will employ the full array of political, economic, diplomatic, and other tools at our disposal, including... tailoring assistance and training of military forces to support civilian control of the military."¹²

In Operation Iraqi Freedom, the standing up of the ISF has been identified as the main effort. The mission remains the same all the way from National Command Authority down to the Regimental and Battalion level. In a letter dated 18 June 2007 Regimental Combat Team-5 (RCT-5) Commander Col L.D. Nicholson states "the mission of this and every other Regiment in Iraq is to support the development of the Iraqi Security Forces."¹³ The idea of nested purpose and intent is a hallmark of Marine planning and execution, as is illustrated above. However, reports from former leaders of MTTs during a Foreign Military Advisor forum

¹¹ Advising Foreign Forces, 41.

¹² National Security Strategy of the United States of America. URL:<<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2006/>>. Accessed 20 January 2008

¹³ Colonel L. D. Nicholson, "A Commanders Perspective for Leaders headed to Iraq... 25 Short Points for Consideration," 18 June 2007, 1.

conducted in late 2005 clearly state that the current policy is failing to meet the Military Defense Strategy:

A number of Marines stressed that on the service level, the issue of advisors must be taken more seriously than it has been in the recent past. There was a general feeling that the current approach to training and managing advisors was too 'ad hoc'.¹⁴

This forum consisted of 17 members ranging from SNCO to Colonel, all former or current transition team advisors. A report from a similar Foreign Military Advisor Conference from 24-26 October 2006 found much the same to be true:

"One of the major recurring themes of the discussions during the conference was that lip-service was being paid to the advisor effort being the "main effort" or the "key to the exit strategy"; priority was not reflected in selection, assignment policies, training, equipping and sustaining the advisor teams."¹⁵

This conference consisted of 13 former transition team members from both Iraq and Afghanistan, including eight former team leaders. Both groups, meeting over 12 months apart, had the same thoughts and feelings concerning the sourcing of transition teams. Although the Military Defense Strategy has clearly designated the transition of control to Iraqi Security Forces as the focus of effort, the actions of Commanders and Staff at the tactical level do not support that designation.

¹⁴ Advising Foreign Forces, 17.

¹⁵ Advising Foreign Forces, 41.

The most prevalent rebuttal to this argument revolves around the mission accomplishment of the parent command of Marines assigned to transition teams. Leaders are understandably wary of sending their best sailors and Marines to transition teams at the possible expense of the deploying unit. This strategy is not viable according to LtCol Leonard, who summarizes the responses of many field grade officers who served in Iraq by saying, "...it was the commander's decision to send our strong players to the MTT for the benefit of the [Iraqi Army]... [The Battalion Commander] and I were able to pick up the slack felt by their loss."¹⁶

Conclusion

Commanders from the President down to battalion commanders have identified transition of security to the Iraqi Security Forces as the mission or the exit strategy in Iraq. Former MTT members and leaders have identified the sourcing of MTTs as an economy of force measure, ad hoc and selection based on availability vice qualifications. Embedding a U.S. military member with a foreign military is an extremely demanding task that requires the right mix of well trained personnel that can work as a team to make small steps towards the foreign military unit becoming self sufficient. Due to the nonstandard,

¹⁶ Lieutenant Colonel Scott Leonard.

demanding nature of the job, it is absolutely essential that each MTT is screened and assembled in advance of its deployment. Current sourcing of MTTs does not meet that standard.

1988 Words